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ABSTRACT

A course at California State University, Northridge, titled Applied Organizational Communication, allows students to apply their understanding of group and organizational communication theory to an actual situation and then in turn to analyze the observations in the organization in terms of those theories. The class forms a simulated organization with the primary mission of service. Students submit resumes and interview for executive and managerial positions; the rest of the students are assigned to divisions. The class spreads out to other rooms so that each division and executives have separate meeting places. The executives are responsible for creating a vision for the organization, setting specific goals, managing time lines for completion of work, reporting to the board of directors, evaluating the managers under them, and managing the development of the organization's culture. Work groups receive proposals for projects that the organization would undertake, make estimates of resources needed to put the proposal into operation and forward the proposals to the executive group for their consideration. Other students gather information necessary for the projects and for the other operations of the organization and develop their own project proposals. The board of directors puts in place an evaluation system and conducts two all-organization meetings for evaluation purposes. Each student completes and submits a daily diary structured around what happened, how he or she felt about it, and how material learned in other classes applies to what happened. (Three course handouts are attached.) (MG)

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THE SIMULATED ORGANIZATION COURSE AT CAL STATE, NORTHRIDGE

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CS507229

Western Speech Communication Association
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Running Head: Simulated Organization

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development, structure, and teaching of Speech Communication 455, Applied Organizational Communication, at California State University, Northridge. Included are the design of the simulated organization, assignments, and teaching strategies. Course handouts are attached.

THE SIMULATED ORGANIZATION COURSE AT CAL STATE, NORTHRIDGE

Speech Communication 455, Applied Organizational Communication, is currently being given its third offering at California State University, Northridge. The course has proved to be a popular one from its inception, and while it tends to draw a specialized audience (traditionally aged college students with little full-time work experience) that audience regards the prospects of taking the course with enthusiasm. This paper, and the accompanying course handouts, will describe the course and the instructional choices that the authors have used in teaching it.

Before beginning, however, we would like to acknowledge a substantial debt to Professor Ernest Bormann of the University of Minnesota. Our course is modeled after a similar one that Professor Bormann has conducted for over twenty years, and the senior author learned to teach the course by working with Professor Bormann on one offering of it while he was a visiting faculty member at Minnesota. While we have made some modifications to suit the Northridge audience, the structure and format of our course are very similar to the Minnesota course.

The prime objective of the course is to allow students to apply their understanding of group and organizational communication theory to an actual situation and then in turn to analyze the communication students observe in the organization in terms of those theories. To this end, we have imposed a prerequisite of either our group communication or our organizational communication course, and we promote the follow-up course in those classes.

The class forms a simulated organization early in its life. The primary mission of this

organization is service, and the organization is called Communication Services UNlimited (or CSUN, which is the abbreviation for Cal State, Northridge). The structure of the organization is determined by the instructors, who also set general goals for the organization's productivity. We have modified both the structure and the goals based on experience with each organization.

The logistics of the course typically pose the greatest challenge for the instructors. Forming the organization typically takes up the greatest amount of time at the beginning of the course, and many students have felt that *too* much time has been taken in doing so. Our typical pattern was to provide a course introduction on the first day, have students submit resumes and interview for the executive positions on the second day, have the executives interview for the managerial positions on the third day, and have the rest of the students assigned to divisions by the fourth day. Since the class meets twice a week for two hours, however, this process takes up the first two weeks of a fifteen week semester, and the students who are not involved in the interview process report feeling confused and left-out. In the current version of the course an interest form was substituted for resumes, the executives were interviewed on the first day, the managers on the second day, and the organizational assignments were made on the second and third days. Morale seems to have improved as a result.

One other logistical factor has been space. Because our campus is crowded and pressed for space, we have scheduled the class during less popular times (Mondays and Wednesdays, 2-4 p.m., or Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4-6 p.m.). By doing so we have been able to obtain five classrooms in relative proximity to each other so that each division and

the executives can have a separate meeting space. Doing so allows problems of proximity and distance to affect communication within divisions, between divisions and communication between managers and employees. Typically, we have to begin the class in one room and spread out to the other rooms during the second or third week of the semester.

A final logistical matter has been co-instruction. Until this semester we have shared instruction of the course. This semester, other scheduling problems within the department made it impossible to provide a team-teaching situation for this course. The advantages to team-teaching are that two perspectives are provided at the top of the hierarchy, and as problems arise (and they inevitably arise) the instructors can bring differing experiences to aiding with the solutions to those problems. The disadvantage can be that both instructors will inevitably bring differing management styles to the situation, and not having one clear person at the top may make adaptation difficult. (Readers from the California State University system who wish to know about how course classifications have been manipulated to allow for team-teaching may contact the first author.)

While the organizational structure has varied, we have attempted to maintain a four-group, two division, pattern. The instructors serve as the board of directors, setting general policy, providing productivity goals, hearing reports from and approving the specific plans of the organization as they arise, and insuring the educational viability of the course as a whole. As we have gained experience with the course, we have added to the board students who took a previous offering of the course. These students receive course credit for sitting on the board, serving as consultants to management, and doing their own analysis of the organization, based on having the same access as instructors to individual class assignments.

The executives include a president, a vice-president for operations, and a vice-president for administration. Together these individuals form the executives group, and they are responsible for creating a vision for the organization, setting specific goals, managing time lines for completion of work, reporting to the board of directors, evaluating the managers under them, and managing the development of the organization's culture. We have tried having a fourth member of the executive group, called alternatively "comptroller" or "executive assistant to the president." In both of these cases, because the individual was a staff person and did not supervise anyone (but still participated in executive group decision-making) conflict between that person and the managers inevitably arose. The duties associated with those positions were assigned to the work groups for the current course offering.

Each division has contained two work groups, and each group was assigned a designated manager. In some cases, co-managers were assigned, and in some cases an assistant manager was designated, but these arrangements typically did not work well. In one case, the work group designated one of its members as assistant manager, and that arrangement (having one designated leader and one emergent leader) seemed to be a quite acceptable one.

On the operations side the work groups were named Project Initiation and Research and Development. Project Initiation received proposals for projects that the organization would undertake, would make estimates of resources (time, people, energy) needed to put the proposal into operation and would forward the proposals to the executive group for their consideration. Research and Development served Project Initiation and the administrative

work groups by gathering information necessary for the projects and for the other operations of the organization and by developing its own project proposals.

On the administration side the work groups were named Personnel and Training and Development. The Personnel group was responsible for maintaining attendance records and collecting assignments, for developing and operating a system for evaluation of performance in the course (which would be educationally viable), for holding any funds that the organization raised to pay for its operations, for completion of any clerical responsibilities needed by the organization, and for establishing and maintaining a system of communication for the organization. Training and Development was responsible for conducting training needs assessments, for designing and executing training programs, and for designing and maintaining a program to improve employee morale. It takes a minimum of twenty-four class members to operate this structure effectively; with more than thirty a fifth division would have to be added.

Projects were decided on by the organization, and proposals were submitted to and subject to approval by the Board of Directors. A minimum of four to five projects was usually set by the Board as a productivity goal. While projects varied widely in scope, many of them have turned out to be charity ventures, probably because these are the sorts of projects that fraternities and sororities undertake, and several of the organization's members feel comfortable with organizing and operating those. As the renown of the course has grown individuals from around campus have contacted the instructors about having the organization undertake projects they have in mind. In assessing this trend, both of us agree that we would like to see the organization undertake more of the kind of project that a

typical business service organization does (e.g., research services or consulting services). We will probably have to come up with suggestions or opportunities for these sorts of projects in order to see them undertaken, however, as most class members are too inexperienced work-wise to seek out those projects on their own.

Besides putting in place an evaluation system (as developed by Personnel and approved by the rest of the organization) the Board conducts two all-organization meetings for evaluation purposes. The first meeting occurs around mid-semester, and the second meeting typically occurs during the final exam period. In both meetings it is understood that the *class*, and not the organization is meeting, and the instructors lead a discussion of principles of group and organizational communication and how those principles are being applied in the organization. In the second meeting, we have employed a structured fishbowl technique that puts each group in turn in the center with the other organization members seated around them. The group in the center has a set period of time to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the organization as they saw them, and then the members of the outside circle have a set period of time to question those in the inner circle about their perceptions. This exercise is typically a very powerful one and provides a way of ending the course without individuals being able to carry their resentments about their group and the organization as a whole away with them. These meetings are often prepared for through the drafting of a group paper, using either text or other resources (we have tried requiring a text and not requiring a text--neither way seems to be entirely satisfactory).

The other mandatory class assignment is a daily diary, to be completed and submitted by each member at the following class meeting. These diaries are structured around the

form (a) what happened, (b) how I felt about what happened, and (c) how I see material I learned in other classes applying to (a) and (b). These diaries are essential, because they provide the Board with a means of gauging what is going on in the organization. By reading the diaries (no mean feat, when they come in twice a week), the Board can anticipate where problems might occur and can take steps to insure that things do not get out of hand. This line becomes a difficult one to walk, as the Board must allow the organization's management to make mistakes and to work their way out of the mistakes but still to keep some control over what is going on. In this way, the Board acts like any good corporate Board of Directors.

The course is graded on a credit/no-credit basis. While this grading system is appealing to students at the beginning of the course, many feel that the work load is such that they would have liked to have received a letter grade for their efforts. Others have expressed a desire to be able to motivate organizational members with activities that translate into grades. We have discussed this matter extensively and have concluded that for us the disadvantages to having a graded system outweigh the advantages, but not by much. Readers who undertake to design similar courses may wish to make the opposite choice.

We have attached the current version of the course handouts. While the course forces the instructors to expend perhaps more emotional energy than physical energy, it is an interesting and welcome break from the traditional lecture-discussion mode of teaching. It is also interesting to see stuc s become more interested in doing graduate work in the field from participating in the analysis activities or in parlaying their experience into paying

jobs (as did the manager of last year's Training and Development group). We enjoy teaching the course, the students seem to enjoy taking it, and there seems to be genuine learning, both conceptual and practical, going on. And that combination seems to be a rarity in higher education today.

Speech Communication 496BA
Applied Organizational Communication
Communication Services UNlimited (CSUN)
Spring 1990

A. ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

The broad goal and philosophy of Communication Services UNlimited, as set by the Board of Directors, is to provide service to one or more specific groups or organizations. The specific goals of Communication Services UNlimited and the groups or organizations it will serve are to be identified and set very early in the semester by the Organization as a whole with the leadership of the Executive Group and Management Council.

B. PRODUCTIVITY GOALS

1. Attendance goals--90% organizational attendance is expected (i.e., for the organization to receive credit, attendance must be at 90% the semester for the organization as a whole).

2. Project goals--the organization as a whole must plan and complete (to the satisfaction of the Board of Directors) a minimum of five projects during the semester for the organization to receive credit. The projects are not in and of themselves organizational goals, but rather methods of achieving the organization goals to be set by Communication Services UNlimited at the beginning of the semester.

C. ACADEMIC GOALS

1. Individual evaluation--the organization must formulate a systematic method of evaluation for each individual member of the organization. Each student's grade (credit/no credit) in the course will be determined from this evaluation.

2. The organization must devise a method for evaluating the organization as a whole and provide the Board of Directors with sufficient time twice during the semester for this evaluation.

3. Academic content

   a. Experiential--each person must produce one diary entry per class meeting.

   b. Informational--each member of the organization will engage in acceptable academic activities (e.g., readings, internal training, presentations from outside sources, etc.) during the semester.

c. Communication analysis--each person in the organization must engage in some activity designed to promote greater understanding of the communication in this organization (e.g., videotaping division meetings and analyzing the communication, network analysis, climate assessment, synthesis paper, etc.).

NOTE: Specifics of each proposal are to be worked out by the organization and proposed by the executive group to the Board of Directors. Each policy will become operative only after it has been approved by the Board of Directors. The major criterion for acceptance is academic defensibility.

Communication Services UNlimited

A Service Organization

Summary of duties

A. Human Resources Division

1. Personnel Group

a. Researches and discusses potential evaluation plans for the organization and proposes to the Management Council a plan consistent with the Board of Directors' broad goals for the organization. The evaluation plan must specify what each organizational member must do to earn a CR grade in SPC 496BA. The evaluation plan must be accepted by the Board of Directors before the organization can operate independently.

b. Devises and implements a system of internal communication for the organization (e.g., newsletter, bulletin board, electronic mail announcements, mailboxes, feedback systems, etc.).

c. Keeps track of attendance and keeps track of diary submissions.

d. Appoints a liaison with the department of Speech Communication staff. This person will be the **official** liaison to the department and will be the **only** person in the organization who will deal with the department staff regarding resources and services that the organization might request from the department.

e. Implements the organization's agreed-upon evaluation plan.

2. Training and Development Group

a. Devises and implements programs designed to assist organizational members to be as productive and effective as possible. Theses programs may include social and morale-building activities.

b. Devises and implements internal training and organizational development programs for the organization and its members, including taking charge of the two all-organizational evaluation sessions.

c. Provides specific training and/or orientation services that may be needed for individual projects that the organization may undertake. Maintains a liaison with project initiation and research and development to help determine what might be the organization's training needs.

d. As needed, videotapes individual sessions for use by the organization in its evaluation activities. Provides one member who learns to use the department videotaping equipment and who is responsible for taping activities.

B. Operations Division

1. Project Initiation Group

a. Receives, generates, and discusses project proposals and assesses resources needed to complete each project. Prepares reports on proposed projects for review by the Management Council.

b. Once projects have been approved, devises and distributes timelines (particularly calendars) and matrix organization plans for each project. Recruits members for matrix project groups and assures the timely completion of projects. Devises and implements mechanisms to assure that project results are of the highest possible quality.

c. Appoints a person who is responsible for maintenance, distribution and record-keeping regarding the organization's resources.

2. Research and Development Group

a. Develops, using available resources, ideas for the organization's projects. Submits these ideas to project initiation for their consideration.

b. Develops ideas for fulfilling the academic information and communication analysis goals of the organization, Submits these ideas to personnel for their consideration.

c. Provides, on request from project initiation or one of the matrix project groups, research necessary to carry out the organization's selected projects.

d. Provides, on request from training and development, research necessary to carry out its internal training and organizational development programs.

e. Designs and implements an ongoing study of communication within the organization .

C. Management Council: consists of the Executive Group plus the managers of the four working groups. The management council generally does the following:

1. Sets objectives for the entire organization.

2. Clarifies work assignments.

3. Solves problems relating to the organization as a whole.

4. Supervises the dual structure (formal organization and matrix organization) to insure that both continue to function effectively (especially once the projects are underway).

5. Reviews performance.

D. Executive Group: consists of the President, the Vice President for Operations (who supervises the Project Initiation and Research & Development Groups) and the Vice President for Human Resources (who supervises the Personnel and Training & Development Groups). This group has the following responsibilities:

1. Deals with the Board of Directors to obtain final approval of specific organizational goals, projects, the evaluation plan, and other matters of general policy that may arise.

2. Sets specific organizational policies.

3. Sets specific organizational goals, keeping in mind that the broad organizational goal set by the Board of Directors is for the organization to provide service to one or more groups or organizations--internal or external. (Examples might include service to the department of Speech Communication, service to the university and/or service to the local community.) This goal setting should be done in consultation with the entire organization immediately upon establishment of the executive group, management council, and work group assignments.

4. Assures that projects that are devised fit within both the broad and specific goals of the organization.

5. Supervises the work of the various groups within the organization to insure that it is of high quality.

6. Insures the timely completion of projects.

7. Establishes and maintains an effective system of information flow and communication.

8. Takes steps to keep morale high and to foster an effective organizational and communication climate and culture.

Speech Communication 496BA--Applied Organizational Communication
Fall 1990

ORGANIZATIONAL DIARIES

The diary that each member of the organization will keep is intended to help him or her reflect on what is happening in the organization on a day-to-day basis. This will allow each person to better understand the nature of the organization, the communication and other behavior that is taking place within it, and to provide the maximum academic learning from this applied setting. By keeping the diary each person will be able to better understand this and any organization and to respond to events that are taking place in the organization, not simply react to them. Doing this will make you a better member of the organization because you will be thinking about organizational issues on many different levels.

The careful and expansive keeping of the diary in this simulated organization will allow you to become proactive rather than reactive in this organization and in those in which you find yourselves in the future.

A. FORMAT OF THE DIARIES:

1. What happened in my division and/or the organization?

   a. What were the important developments concerning tasks in my division and/or the organization. Be as expansive as possible; the more reflection you provide, the richer your experience. This part of the diary is a reflection upon and analysis of task processes that you observe.

   b. What were some of the important developments concerning the socio-emotional dimensions of my division and/or in the organization. Again, be as expansive as possible. This part of the diary is a reflection upon and analysis of the socio-emotional processes that you observe.

2. What happened to me?

   a. What were my main communicative decisions?

   b. Was I right or wrong? If wrong, what do I think would have been a better decision?

   c. How do I feel about the meeting?

   d. What happened to me in terms of my role, group and or/organizational norms, organizational and communication climate and culture, relationships, social tensions, task dimensions, etc?

3. **No information in your diaries will be shared with other members of the organization** (so you can be honest in your entires).

B. **MECHANICS OF THE DIARIES:**

1. All diary entries **MUST** be submitted at the class meeting immediately following the class session for which it was written (i.e., entries written for class on Tuesday will be submitted on Thursday of that week and entries written for class on Thursday will be submitted on the next Tuesday).

2. All diary entries must be submitted on standard sized notebook paper (i.e., 8 1/2 X 11 paper).

3. Typing of diary entries is preferred; **NEATLY** handwritten diary entries are acceptable.

4. Failure to turn in diaries will lead to a no credit grade for the course.

5. Keep an extra copy of each diary entry in a personal file. Also keep an extra copy of all other written materials you prepare, any ideas you want to keep track of, etc. in this file. These materials can be used to chart the process of your tenure in the organization.

N.B.: AGAIN, DIARY ENTRIES WILL BE SEEN ONLY BY MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS. NO OTHER MEMBER OF THE ORGANIZATION WILL EVER SEE YOUR DIARY ENTRIES!